

# **MASS** **COMMUNICATION**

**A Book of Readings**



Edited by

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Public Relations: the Art and Social Science of Crisis Management

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#### Introduction

It is commonly said that the only constant thing in life is change; unfortunately, same can be said of crisis. Crisis can arise in any place and at any time in as much as the condition is made favourable. It is nurtured by degeneration in human relationships; hence, the more the communication gap between the concerned parties, the more difficult it is to manage. Crisis varies in degrees, ranging from a minor misunderstanding between two youngsters to a major power struggle among political parties which may result in a loss of lives. It can occur within a natural set up such as a society, or in an artificial establishment such as an organization. In this paper however, our attention will be limited to conflict as related to business organizations.

According to Seitel (2007), the complexities of the world today have made it certain that organizations and people cannot avoid trouble and violence. Wherever there is violence and trouble, wise counsel is required. Serphos (2009) also corroborate this by stating that companies experience conflict from time to time be it product recall, tax evasion, tainted products, etc. Hence, if it is certain that every business will at one time or the other be exposed to some level of crisis, it is only logical to be prepared before it occurs. Public relations specializes in preparing organizations for crisis before they occur. This paper focuses on the involvement of public relations (PR) in crisis management, the art and the social science of the process and specific steps to take immediately a crisis breaks out. A model is also proposed to illustrate the stages of conflict management.

## **Public Relations**

Public relations (PR) is probably one of the most frequently defined fields of study. Definitions abound almost as many as the professionals and academics in the field. This is consequent on the need to adapt PR to varying events, conditions and entities. According to Daramola (2003), a survey of over 500 simple and complex definitions by Rex Harlow led to the conclusion that there are many ways to define public relations. Nevertheless, some definitions will still be considered for the sake of this work. According to Jefkins (1983:1), "public relations consists of all forms of planned communication, outward and inward, between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objective concerning mutual understanding." Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997:5) in their definition state that "public relations is a management function that helps achieve organizational objectives, define philosophy, and facilitate organizational change." The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) presents PR as encompassing "counselling management at all level in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action, and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities" (Adelabu, 2008: 621). The final definition to be considered for this work is the one popularly referred to as the Mexican Statement. According to this statement, public relations is the "art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organization's leaders, and implementing a planned program of action which serves both the organization and public interest" (Daramola, 2003: 12). All the definitions above have attempted in one way or the other to capture the essence of public relations, and can be said to have succeed in providing illumination into the nature of the discipline. For the sake of this study however, we shall adopt the last definition given above, which is the Mexican Statement. The definition provides an insight into the past, present and future responsibilities of public relations. According to the definition, public relations analyzes trends, predicts consequences and implements planned program of action. These responsibilities of PR will be explored in details later in this work. At this stage, the focus is on public relations as art and social science.

## **Public Relations: The Art**

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines art as the use of the imagination to express ideas and feelings. It is also an ability or skill that can be developed through training and practice. Another definition says art is the process or a product of deliberately arranging elements in a particular way that appeals to the senses or emotion. It encompasses a diverse range of human activities, creations, and modes of expression (Wikipedia, 2009).

The idea of public relations as an art is captured in the definitions given above. Since PR deals with human beings, and humans are dynamic in nature, it becomes logical that the discipline should also be dynamic. The need for PR to be imaginative in the expression of ideas and feelings cannot be overemphasized. Considering the fact that no two situations are exactly the same, new ways must be constantly developed for achieving PR objectives. Ideas must be creatively presented and emotions must be sensibly expressed. For instance, if a commercial airline company experiences a plane crash, the PR officer or the company's spokes person must mind the expression of emotions. This individual must sympathize with the families of the victims without dashing the hope of the families of the injured. Depending on the circumstance, PR officers must sympathize or celebrate with their publics. This requires sensitivity such that cannot be found in textbooks, thus placing a demand on their creativity.

In public relations, deliberate effort is made to arrange communication elements in such a way that is appealing to its public. Media messages are presented in creative ways so as to connect with the emotions of the audience. This is another artistic aspect of public relation. Considering the fact that the audience does not necessarily want to read, watch or listen to PR messages, the success of the messages will depend on how appealing they are. The strength of public relations as an art lies in its mode of expression.

## **The Social Science**

Social science can be simply defined as a study of people in society (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2003). It involves the investigation into the social life of human groups and individuals. In social science, a systematic procedure is established for the evaluation of human behaviour. Inquiries are made into social phenomena with the aim of acquiring better understanding of human relationships.

Public relations is a social science because it engages socio scientific procedures in achieving its objectives. In being scientific, public relations makes use of research. Kerlinger (1986) defines scientific research as a systematic, controlled, empirical, as well as critical investigation of hypothetical propositions concerning the presumed relationship among observed phenomena. All the validating processes of a scientific research stated in the definition above apply to public relations except that in this case, the phenomena cannot be controlled. Since human beings are unpredictable, it would be unrealistic to expect that their societies can be controlled for the sake of a research. This therefore crystallizes the social attribute of public relations research.

## **Conflict**

According to Nkwoche (2005) as cited in Nwanne (2006: 56), crisis can be defined as "any event, issue occurrence or situation which constitutes a significant breach in the natural order of things and produces a disruptive force that can destroy an organization." Nwanne observes that crisis is not limited to organizations; rather, it could affect individuals, countries, etc. Another definition of crisis is proposed by Barton (1993) as cited in Adelabu (2008: 619), and says that it is "a major, unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition and reputation." Hook (2009) explains that a crisis is a true test of what we are either as individuals or as a company.

Folarin (1998, 49) identifies the following as sources of conflict:

- 1) Competition over goals and interests that cannot be shared. In this context, conflict arises when individuals or groups compete for interests that are indivisible. For instance, the struggle to gain control of power may lead to conflict. McDonald (2004) as cited in Asak (2008) corroborates this by stating that conflict among individuals in the work place and even between businesses results naturally from the competitive environment in which the business operates.
- 2) Usurpation or Attempt to usurp the goals of one component by another component of a society. Here, the stronger or more privileged component violates or denies the rights of the other component in a bid to achieve its own aim. When this happens, the deprived party usually attempts to re-establish its position either forcefully or otherwise. In the business environment, a stronger firm may stage a hostile takeover on a weaker one. An attempt by the weaker firm to prevent this takeover will definitely result in crisis.
- 3) Inconsistencies in goals. While allowance may be made for pockets of indeterminacies in all human goals, too many unjustifiable inconsistencies in the goals set by individuals or groups in a society may become a source of conflict. For instance, if the management of an organization fails to fulfill its promises to its employees, or policies pertaining to their welfare are arbitrarily altered, crisis can develop. In a case where there is disparity in the policies and the practices of the management of the organization, the employees will not know what to believe.
- 4) Increasing desire for autonomy or authority by the different individuals or groups in the community. Conflict ensues when a former subordinate individual or group attempts to secede or exert authority over a wider range of issues. Any effort by the erstwhile dominant party to maintain the status quo may lead to conflict. A good example of this is a business in which there is high labour turn over. As the employees attempt to leave, the management may make new policies to prevent the labour movement. This situation can result into crisis.

- 5) Scarcity or inadequacy of resources to meet the needs of the various components. Conflict evolves when the resources that are required to meet specific needs are scarce, and more importantly, when the few available are not evenly distributed. When adequate resources are not made available to the components of a business, or some departments benefit at the expense of other, crisis is likely to evolve.
- 6) Various kinds of communication breakdown. Conflict can evolve when there is hoarding of information, inefficient dissemination of information, or even the use of inappropriate channels of communication within a society. When a few individuals or groups benefit from available information at the expense of the others, there is bound to be conflict.

Folarin (op.cit) further observes that scholars of sociology and management have proposed several categories of conflict. He considers his own four-fold categorization to be the simplest. According to him, conflict can be *divergent*, *symmetrical*, *complementary*, and *parallel* (Folarin, op.cit, pp.50).

- 1) **Divergent Conflict:** a divergent conflict occurs when every member or group within a business community is practically pursuing individual goals that are different from the corporate goal of the society, and which are difficult to reconcile with the extant goals. Consequent on the failure to agree, the business ends up with not just two factions, but several.
- 2) **Symmetrical Conflict:** this type of conflict arises when co-operation is hindered by the pursuance of the same goal by two or more separate entities or groups. Due to the indivisibility of the goal, there ensues a breakdown in the existing relationship.
- 3) **Complementary Conflict:** this type of conflict is a product of a misinterpretation of the goals or intentions of one party by another. Though the goals of one group complement those of the other, they are mistakenly perceived as being contradictory or opposed to one another.
- 4) **Parallel Conflict:** in this type of conflict, each party reserves the right to make its decision and execute it. For instance, while labour unions

reserve the right to call for a strike action and manage it, the management of an organization also claims a legitimate power to undertake all lawful procedures to ensure the security of its property. The extent to which such rights and powers are exercised however depends on several factors, such as the personality of each participant, and the historical perspective of the existing relationships among the parties. Parallel conflicts are relatively harmless, as far as each of the parties recognizes the limits of its rights and powers, and does not go beyond them.

### **Public Relations And Conflict Management**

The process of crisis management focuses on the rebuilding of broken-down relationships, and this falls within the purview of public relations. Public relations practice has become well known in recent times because of the great assistance it offers in crises resolution. Because of the complexities of the world today, it is certain that organizations and people cannot avoid trouble and violence. Wherever there is violence and trouble, wise counsel is required (Seitel, 2007). Conflict is the outcome of unchecked degeneration in human relationships, and according to Folarin (1998), it evolves in stages; first we have an issue, then it evolves into conflict, and finally into crises.

#### **What is an Issue?**

Folarin (op cit: 45) presents the following descriptions of an issue:

- 1) It is a topic or subject matter that is of interest to all or some of the publics of an organization or institution.
- 2) It is a matter or an event that has potential or realized consequences for a public or the publics of an organization or institutions.
- 3) It is a topic around which public opinion has crystallized into identifiable characteristics.



Hence, to forestall or at least minimize the frequency and/or magnitude of crises, it is necessary for issue management to become a routine aspect of public relations practice.

### **Issue Management**

Howard Chase (1982: 1-2) says the following about “issue management,” a term coined in 1976:

Issue management is the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate, and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills, towards achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny.

Seitel (2007) identifies five steps in issue management:

- 1) Identification of issues that an organization or individual should be concerned about.
- 2) Analysis and delimitation of each issue taking into consideration its effect on constituent publics.
- 3) Exhibition of various strategic options available to the organization.
- 4) Implementation of action programs to communicate the organization's views, and to influence the perception on the issue
- 5) Evaluation of the action programs in terms of reaching organizational goals.

### **Managing a Crisis**

The Harvard Business School defines crisis as a situation that has reached a critical stage requiring dramatic and extraordinary intervention to avoid or repair major damage (Long, 2001, as cited in Seitel, 2007). Hence, crisis management includes those methods that are used to respond to the crisis. Managing a crisis may be the first step in resolving it since it has to be curtailed before a more lasting solution can be considered.

It has been generally agreed by both PR academics and professionals that the best way to deal with a crisis is to be proactive. According to Hussaini and Mohammed (2008), the proactive mode of public relations approach means the ability of PR to anticipate problems ahead of time and to make plans and arrangements to solve them properly. Igben (2008) refers to this same process as preventive public relations. He calls it the modern responsibility of PR, explains that it involves taking action ahead of time.

An organization's skill in handling itself in the midst of crises will have a bearing on the way it is perceived by its various publics for years to come. Since public relations has been defined as the "art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizations' leaders, and implementing a planned program of action which serves both the organization and the public interest" (Daramola, 2005), it becomes obvious that it has a role to play in conflict resolution.

From the definition given above, public relations analyses trends by assessing the past records of an organization. If the organization has encountered some level of crises in the past, or if there are unresolved issues, this will be an indication that the publics of the organization are not satisfied with its activities. By analyzing the precedent of the organization, it will be possible to predict the consequence of the organizational policies and then plan a program of action. These three responsibilities of public relations form the basis of the practice. In the context of crisis management, I call them the *reflective*, *projective* and *active* functions of public relations.

### **Reflective Function**

Public relations has the responsibility to be reflective in its approach towards crisis. This involves a careful investigation into the past of the organization. Ideally, a public relations officer of an organization is expected to constantly monitor the progress of that organization so as to quickly detect any potential

crisis. Anytime such is discovered, a careful research is conducted into the past of the organization so as to trace the origin of the issue. This will help to nip it in the bud. However, in the event of a crisis, the PRO is expected to investigate its origin by carrying out a reflective action. By reflecting into the past of the organization, there will be better illumination into the future of the organization. This aspect of public relations focuses on the socio scientific attribute of the discipline, which is research.

### **Projective Function**

This is also the proactive function of public relations. Based on the facts gathered from the reflective stage, a projection is made into the future. Here, the PRO predicts the consequences of current happenings after analyzing the trend of events. If a bleak future is foreseen, necessary precaution is taken. Hence, the action is taken ahead of time. The projective function of public relations falls within the social science aspect of the discipline.

### **Active Function**

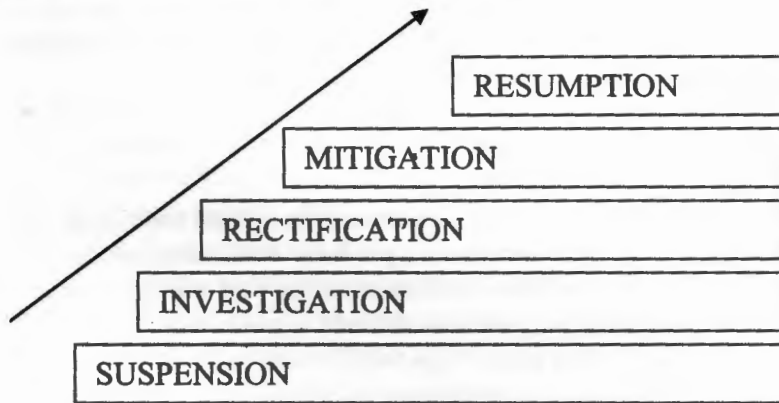
This responsibility of public relations represents the current state of action of the organization. After the first two stages have been satisfied, the PRO counsels the management of the organization on the best course of action to undertake. This involves all the strategies that will be put in place in the present so as to avoid the impending crisis. This should include the preparation of a crisis plan. It is advisable for organizations to prepare their crisis plans long before they need them. Sephos (2008) advises that organizations should see a crisis plan as an insurance policy for its corporate image. Bernstein (2008) suggests that a crisis communication plan should provide a system for coordinated, prompt, honest, informative and concerned response to crisis. This plan should not just be a manual with scenario and instructions; rather, it should include an audit of the organization's vulnerability, which must result in recommendations for better performance. The active function of public relation is one of the major artistic aspects of the discipline. This is because the planned

programme of action that will be embarked upon must be creative, and the communication messages must be designed in such a way that appeals to the emotions of the audience.

### **Steps To Crisis Management**

Hook (2009) observes that no matter how well an organization prepares for crisis, the true test of the efficacy of the plan is the actual experience. He explains that we never know for sure how we will perform until we are faced with the situation. Nevertheless, preparation can be made in principle. Hence, a model is proposed by this author for “on-the-spot” crisis response.

### **The Crisis Response Model**



**Suspension:** when a crisis occurs in an organization, the first step to be taken is to stem its flow. Immediate action must be taken to suspend whatever issue is associated with the crisis. The action that is at the center of the crisis must be suspended. For instance, if the product of a company is found to be defective and is associated with loss of lives, the company must immediately suspend further production, suspend further sales and recall the ones in the market. This will give the consumers a sense of security and will assure them of the

genuine concern of the company. It would be an error for the company to embark on an investigation into the cause of the defect while the product is still in the market claiming more lives. Failure to immediately recall the product may result in complete abandonment by the consumers.

**Investigation:** this is the second step in crisis response and it includes a thorough research into the cause of the product defect. At this stage, it is safe to set up an inquiry into the situation at hand without being afraid of more damage being done since the product has been recalled. This stage may last for a while depending on the intensity of the problem. If the investigation prolongs more than necessary, the company's business may be adversely affected. Whatever be the case, the company's PRO can use this period to build goodwill by keeping his publics informed about the developments. The findings should be made public as soon as possible so that the consumers can be put at ease. Credibility can also be created for the company by allowing the CEO to announce the findings of the investigation and to tell the public what the company will do to correct the defect and to prevent future occurrence.

**Rectification:** active steps must be taken to correct the defect. While the previous step ends with the determination of the action plan, this step involves the actual execution. The company must make deliberate effort to find a lasting solution to the problem. It may involve the installation of a better security system in the case of a sabotage, or adherence to stricter health procedures. Whatever action is taken should be communicated to the publics of the company so as to create a sense of involvement.

**Mitigation:** a "clean-up" programme should be institute to take care of the effect of the crisis. This may be in the form of paying compensations to the affected parties or paying hospital bills. The extent of the mitigation required will depend on the degree of the damage done. It is noteworthy however that in some cases, mitigation may have started immediately after suspension. For instance, if a commercial airline suffers a plane crash and there are survivors, providing health care cannot be left until later, it has to be immediate.

**Resumption:** the final step in the crisis response model is the resumption of earlier suspended business. The new and improved product is reintroduced into the market. If steps one to four were effectively executed, and the PRO maintained an open line of communication between the company and its publics, consumers are supposed to be anticipating the return of the product to the market. The CEO should grant an interview or hold a press conference to give the public an update. In this update, the public must be assured that the crisis has been laid to rest finally. The CEO must also thank all the consumers of the product for their commitment to the brand and their support during the crisis. They must be assured that in appreciation of their support, the product is returning to the market as a new and improved version for their better satisfaction. Press releases should be issued concerning the date of the re-launch and the event should be given adequate media coverage.

### **Conclusion**

In the business environment, crisis is a certainty no matter its scale. While some firms witness it relatively often, some others may not experience any for years. Whatever be the case, organizations must not wait to experience crisis before they prepare for it. A detailed crisis plan must have been designed in case it will ever be needed. Public relations is one of the most effective means of managing crisis. Considering the creative as well as the empirical attributes of public relations, all sides have been covered. The crisis response model will also ensure that appropriate actions are taken during crisis and that the unfortunate event is effectively utilized to make the company better and to improve the satisfaction and confidence of all related publics.

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